

PREVENTIVE HEALTH CARE

AHA Scientific Position

The American Heart Association believes that basic preventive healthcare services should be an integral part of an equitable, comprehensive healthcare plan, accessible to all.

In the past three decades great strides have been made in preventing and treating heart disease. Death rates from cardiovascular disease have declined as a result, mainly because so many people have made positive lifestyle changes.

Why is preventive health care so important?

About half of all deaths from heart disease are sudden and unexpected, so there's little opportunity for treatment. For people at risk of sudden death, prevention is the key.

In 1998 an estimated 553,000 coronary artery bypass procedures were performed on 336,000 patients. If all heart attack-prone people were treated surgically, the cost would be prohibitive. Technological treatments for heart disease such as angioplasty, thrombolytic (throm"bo-LIT'ik) therapy, antiarrhythmic (an"tih-ah-RITH'mik) drugs and pacemakers aren't cures. More importantly, such procedures can do nothing about slowing atherosclerosis (ath"er-o-skleh-RO'sis), the underlying process that causes most heart disease. And because of supply problems and other issues, it isn't realistic to think about heart transplants for everyone with severe heart disease.

That's why more effort should be focused on prevention. Atherosclerosis begins in early adulthood, but it may be decades before clinical disease shows up. We don't fully understand all the causes of heart disease, but many population studies have identified major risk factors and strategies to reduce the risk. These are risk factors we can modify, treat or control:

- Tobacco smoke
- High blood cholesterol
- High blood pressure
- Physical inactivity
- Obesity and overweight
- Diabetes mellitus (di"ah-BE'teez or di"ah-BE'tis meh-LI'tis)

The decline in death rates from cardiovascular disease in the United States may be due largely to the public's adopting a more healthful lifestyle. This decline underscores why it's important for the medical profession to advocate prevention strategies. More and more evidence shows that atherosclerotic plaques in arteries can regress even in people with advanced disease. As our understanding of the causes of heart disease and stroke has improved, the Association is directing preventive measures at healthcare providers, patients and families, who can work together to implement our Primary and Secondary Prevention Guidelines.

By focusing on prevention, we can have a major impact on people's health. The Association wants all people to know their risk factors for heart disease and stroke and the goals for both prevention and treatment. This approach includes people knowing how to effectively use the many strategies available to achieve these goals. In the long run, it makes sense that prevention costs less than expensive medical interventions.